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You are here: [Home](#) ▶ [News](#) ▶ [Mershon News](#) ▶ Mershon faculty affiliate plays role in Ohio redistricting process

NEWS MENU

- MERSHON NEWS
- EXPERTS LIST
- FACT SHEET

MERSHON FACULTY AFFILIATE PLAYS ROLE IN OHIO REDISTRICTING PROCESS

In 2012, President Barack Obama carried Ohio by 2 percentage points – yet Republicans won 62 of 99 state House seats and 12 of 16 congressional seats.

In 2014, four winners in the Ohio Senate, 14 in the Ohio House, and one U.S. Congressman, Bob Gibbs, faced no opponent in the general election.

How could one party gain such a large majority of seats, with so many of them uncontested, in what many regard as the quintessential swing state?

One word: gerrymandering.

After each census conducted every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau decides the number of Congressional representatives each state will get. In 2010, Ohio lost two representatives due to its loss of population. As a result, it had to redraw its congressional and state legislative districts.

In Ohio, districts are drawn by the Apportionment Board, composed of the governor, state auditor, secretary of state, and two members of the legislature from each party.

After Republicans swept state elections in 2010, they did what one might expect a political party to do: They draw the legislative districts to benefit themselves. Rather than a swing state, Ohio became known as one of the worst states for political gerrymandering in the country.

Watching this process was Mershon affiliate **Richard Gunther**, international coordinator of the 21-country Comparative National Elections Project.

Gunther has been involved in redistricting reform efforts for almost a decade. In 2005 he was active in the Reform Ohio Now initiative campaign, and in 2009 and 2010, he worked with the League of Women Voters and Ohio Citizen Action to develop a redistricting reform proposal.

The 2010 effort identified several objectives for redistricting -- representational fairness, competitiveness, geographical compactness, and the preservation of county and municipal borders – that were incorporated into House Joint Resolution 15, which passed the House by a vote of 68-27.

That year the Senate also passed a redistricting resolution formulated by then-Sen. Jon Husted, but despite Gunther’s involvement in negotiations, the two measures could not be reconciled.

In 2012, Gunther joined with the League of Women Voters and Common Cause to help formulate another redistricting initiative, which went on the Ohio ballot in 2012. It, too, was defeated.

At that point, the Ohio legislature created the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission, whose purpose was to review the entire Ohio constitution and recommend changes. One of its first orders of business was to examine the redistricting process.

By 2014, the commission still had not issued any recommendations, so one legislator took things into his own hands. Rep. Matt Huffman (R-Lima) introduced House Joint Resolution 11, to reform the Congressional redistricting process, and House Joint Resolution 12, to reform state legislative redistricting procedures.

“Both bills were initially unacceptable, in so far as they would have perpetuated domination of Ohio politics by one part over at least an additional decade,” Gunther said of the two bills.



Gunther, along with the League of Women Voters and Common Cause, testified against both resolutions before the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission and the House committee holding hearings on the bills – and this time their efforts were a success.

First, at the request of federal Rep. John Boehner, current speaker of the U.S. House, HJR 11 related to congressional redistricting was shelved. Second, a serious bipartisan effort began to improve HJR 12, related to state legislative redistricting.

“Much to my surprise, I was invited to serve as one of the five negotiators who crafted this very complex reform package,” Gunther said. Other negotiators included Rep. Vernon Sykes (D-Akron), House Minority Counsel Sarah Cherry, Republican former Sen. Jeff Jacobson, and House Majority Counsel Mike Lenzo.

After the resolution passed the House, 81-7, Senate Majority Counsel Frank Strigari and the Senate Minority Counsel Pavan Parikh joined the negotiating team.

“We met behind closed doors for a total of 38 hours in negotiating substantial number of major changes in HJR 12,” Gunther said.

Negotiations often ran late into the night, culminating in a dramatic late night session in which the resolution was approved by the Senate, 28-1, at 4 a.m. – “although my direct involvement in that final negotiating session ended mercifully at 11:20,” Gunther said.

As passed, HJR 12 would add two legislators – one from each party – to the Apportionment Board. Four votes, including at least two from the minority party, would be needed to approve a redistricting map. A map that didn’t get minority support could still go into effect, but only for four years instead of 10.

The resolution also sets rules to respect geographical boundaries and political subdivisions. Maps could not be drawn primarily to favor one party, and the proportion of districts leaning to each party must resemble the state’s preferences in recent elections.

Gunther calls HJR 12 a good reform. “I was able to include in the text of HJR 12 many important provisions that we developed in preparation for our (2012) initiative. Foremost among these is the inclusion of a ‘representational fairness’ criterion that had never before been included in the Ohio Constitution,” he said. “I regard it as a very strong step towards partisan fairness and improving the quality of democracy in Ohio.”

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